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Cities, Once Beacons of a Progressive Future, Now Face A Class Crisis

Increasingly unaffordable, they're forcing out families and workers. Author Richard Florida says a new political coalition could fix that.

Oh, what a difference a decade has made for our love affair with the city.

Just a few years ago, many urban planners and theorists described the next-generation of cities as hopeful harbingers of a new world filled with less consumption and increased opportunity, a remarkable combination of efficiency, sustainability, and scale. After a decades-long slide sparked by the urban riots in the 1960s, cities were on the comeback trail. Or so we thought.

Today, many cities are seen as a poster child for class and worker inequality. Instead of offering opportunity for all, they've come under fire as an exclusionary playground for the very wealthy and free-spending tourists (sometimes the only people who can afford places like San Francisco and London). Today, many cities are seeing low

and middle-income residents flee and their bedrock retailers leave, the gaps replaced by self-contained corporate spaceships, artisanal bakeries, and expanding tent cities of the homeless.

“The city is the arena for innovation, economic progress *and* class conflict today,” said Richard Florida, the celebrated sociologist/urban futurist, in a recent interview with Reinvent.

Wait—is this *the* Richard Florida? The guy who became famous in 2002 with the “The Rise of the Creative Class,” which predicted cities would be a nirvana of technology, talent and tolerance, particularly for knowledge workers (i.e. the creative class) who employ their brains rather than their brawn to make a living? It is indeed.

Today, Florida admits that there are more losers than winners in the cityscape. “I got wrong that the creative class could magically restore our cities, become a new middle class like my father’s, and we were going to live happily forever after,” he told an audience in Houston. “I could not have anticipated among all this urban growth and revival that there was a dark side to the urban creative revolution, a very deep dark side.”

In his latest book, “The New Urban Crisis,” Florida addresses the ramifications of the decline of the middle class’s presence in cities, and has done some fundamental rethinking. He’s rearranged some of his mental furniture, admitting he underestimated the rapidity of the recent urban revival—it turns out that smaller cities without big tech or large universities aren’t rising in the same balloon as their larger counterparts. He also underestimated the vitriol that the self-absorbed city dweller lifestyle generates. “This is an urgent problem,” he admitted. “Maybe I missed it.”

A crisis of success

The city has always been a mix of conflicting social interests and values, but recently, its problems have changed. The new urban crisis is founded on inequality, Florida says.

“The older urban crisis was really the crisis of the center city and people in jobs, companies moving to the suburbs,” Florida said. “In a sense, the middle fell out of the center city, the middle class left, the jobs left and the center city became what was called at that time the

hole in the donut. The new urban crisis is quite different because it is partly a crisis of success.”



Florida: there is a dark side to urban prosperity.

While the stock market soared and many became wealthy, a lot more saw their jobs and lifestyle take a series hit. The changes of the past 15 years have benefited some communities and divided others, creating what Florida calls a “winner-take-all” urbanism in which “these winners get the lion’s share of talent, the lion’s share of economic assets, the lion’s share of technology, finance, media, entertainment industries.”

The result is that people with good educations and jobs can enjoy their cities, Gatsby-like, while others get priced out of places where their families had lived for generations, reinforcing the cycles of poverty, inequality and segregation. Places like New York and San Francisco represent the epitome of this belief: soaring economically, but increasingly affordable to only a few.

The rise of populism

That development led Florida to write his new book: “Over the past decade, I really became increasingly interested in the growing inequity. That was part and parcel of the urban revival. Not just the growing inequity of our cities, but the growing inequity of our geography broadly.”

One of the ramifications of this inequality and anti-urban backlash was the election of Donald Trump. “The rising geographic inequality between the winners and the rest sows the seeds of a xenophobic, racist restoration movement, which we call populist,” Florida said. “Trump is attracting people who are turned off by the values of these urban centers, the values of tolerance, open-mindedness. They want to return to what they consider traditional American values. They think of themselves as the real Americans, while the people who live in the cities are not the real Americans and are a threat to Americanism.”

“The grandest of all grand challenges we face is building great cities.”

In places like San Francisco, there is also a backlash against tech companies, often a source of the *nouveau riche*. “You see a growing movement to say, ‘Tech companies are a big part of the problem’ and that really worries me,” Florida said. “Because tech companies are key to generating the innovations, the technologies, creating the jobs. In American history, the financial companies may have been the devil before, big monopolistic industrial companies may have been the devil before. But Americans has always liked innovators. “

But Florida sees the blaming of the tech community as a straw dog: “There is very little of any evidence that links tech companies to growing inequality. There are other characteristics of those cities: they’re expensive and they haven’t built enough housing. But it’s hard to pin the blame of rising inequality and segregation on tech companies.”

In the end, says Florida, “One thing that worries me are these joint backlashes. There’s the backlash from the right against progressive forward-looking values and the backlash in the left against the tech companies.”

Urbanism for all

Florida believes in solution he calls “urbanism for all.” These ideas spring out of the broader New Urbanism movement which is based on the idea that human needs should be the first component of urban planning. The key components of this movement include affordable

housing, walkable streets, inviting public space, diverse neighborhoods, accessible transit, and shopping nearby.

“The grandest of all grand challenges we face is building great cities,” said Florida. “Climate change, equity, poverty, employment, inequality, intolerance—all of those problems turn on one thing: building better cities and urban areas. Making cities work rather than pull us apart.”

One part of that far-sighted urban planning involves the emerging sharing economy. “One of the last arenas of inefficiency in our economy is the city,” he says. “The lights are on, the housing isn’t used, the car stay parked. We have all these fixed assets which are barely used. Office buildings go empty. Houses where people are in home. The sharing economy is a way to take that city as a platform for innovation and economic growth and make it more efficient.”

Florida says that the best way to build a vibrant and sustainable middle class today is to make sure that the everyone, no matter what portion of the workforce they represent, feels like their needs are part of a broad-based solution. He believes that what is needed is a new “natural coalition” of knowledge workers and service workers. Despite their occupational divides, they share a desire to make cities work for all.

Still, Florida sees hope rather than despair for our cities. “In the long run, clustered dynamic vibrant diverse urban capitalism will prevail,” he says. “But this is a time where all of us have to dig deep.” It’s a time, he says it’s a time where “acting locally really matters and empowering local actors, empowering mayors and councilors, empowering different kinds of cities to focus on and solve their own problems. I think if we do that, we’ll be okay. But this is a big turning point in our history.”



